

News Release

Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Assabet River NWR · Great Meadows NWR · Mashpee NWR · Massasoit NWR · Monomoy NWR ·
Nantucket NWR · Nomans Land Island NWR · Oxbow NWR

73 Weir Hill Road, Sudbury, MA 01776

978/443-4661 Fax: 978/443-2898 <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/easternmanwrcomplex>

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New Blanding's Turtle Population Proposed for Assabet River NWR

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is proposing to establish a Blanding's turtle population on the Assabet River NWR, which is located in Stow, Sudbury, Maynard, and Hudson. A draft Environmental Assessment (EA) will be released for public review and comment on September 12, 2007. The draft EA can be viewed on-line at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/easternmanwrcomplex> or in person at the refuge complex headquarters, located at the Great Meadows NWR in Sudbury, MA.

In conjunction with the Friends of Assabet River NWR, a public meeting will be held on Wednesday, October 3 at 7:30 pm. Dr. Kurt Buhlmann, a conservation biologist who helped the USFWS develop this proposal, will make a presentation about the project and will be available to answer questions. The meeting will take place at the Great Meadows NWR, 73 Weir Hill Road in Sudbury, MA.

The comment period will close on October 12, 2007. Comments can be sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, attn: Blandings Turtle EA at 73 Weir Hill Road, Sudbury, MA 01776.

Two national wildlife refuges – Oxbow NWR and Great Meadows NWR – currently have the two largest known Blanding's turtle populations in all of New England. The Assabet River NWR is large enough to support a population of Blanding's turtles, has favorable habitat conditions (wetland and upland), is located within the heart of this species range within the New England landscape and is located roughly equi-distant between the two refuges. It is believed that Blanding's turtles did formerly occur on what is now the Assabet River NWR. However, they are not known to occur at the refuge now. Given the lack of nearby sizable populations and the fragmented landscape between Assabet River NWR and other known populations, natural re-colonization of the Assabet River NWR by Blanding's turtles is unlikely. Therefore, the USFWS is proposing to repatriate Blanding's turtles at the Assabet River NWR.

The draft EA outlines and evaluates potential strategies. The preferred alternative provides the best chance of successfully establishing a viable population in the future at Assabet River NWR, without negatively impacting donor population(s). The preferred alternative consists of obtaining hatchlings, head-started hatchlings, and a small number of juvenile turtles from Oxbow NWR and releasing them at Assabet River NWR. The majority of the hatchlings would be direct-released at each refuge, but some hatchlings (exact number depends on capacity of head-start facilities) would be kept in captivity and head-started through each winter. Head-started turtles and juveniles would be outfitted with radio transmitters as part of a commitment to long-term monitoring to evaluate survivorship and annually adapt our release strategy. Results from monitoring in 2007-2008 and future modeling work will help inform strategies for releases in 2008 and 2009.

The USFWS is completing a draft status assessment for the Blanding's turtle, which has been listed by Massachusetts as a threatened species. Evidence indicates that the magnitude of the threats to the species may warrant the need to provide federal protection for the species in the northeast. A project that aims to establish a population on an existing national wildlife refuge would help meet recovery goals as well as the USFWS mission to restore wildlife populations.

Assabet River NWR, Great Meadows NWR, and Oxbow NWR are three of eight refuges that comprise the Eastern Massachusetts NWR Complex, which is headquartered in Sudbury at the Great Meadows NWR. These refuges are part of a national network of lands and waters which are administered for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. There are currently 547 national wildlife refuges across the country, protecting over 100 million acres of land for wildlife conservation.